

How to ensure food safety?

‘Black-hearted food’ in mainland China has been a worrying issue for many years. But what exactly are the problems and what can be done to improve them?

FOOD safety problems in the mainland are hardly anything new. Businesses are regularly accused of ignoring safety standards for greater profits. Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation pollutes the environment, and toxic pollutants enter the food chain, harming consumers’ health. Hong Kong, which relies heavily on the mainland for imported food, is inevitably affected by its ‘black-hearted food’. The Student Standard answers three big questions about this alarming issue.

Q: What food safety problems is China facing?

Black-hearted food

Agriculture in the mainland is facing many problems. These are collectively labelled the Three Rural Issues (三農問題). They include **dwindling** manpower and land. This has prompted farmers to use chemicals to **boost** yield.

“Reform and opening up” emphasises economic growth. To yield greater profits, some unscrupulous food merchants have **resorted** to using harmful ingredients to cut costs.

Food contamination

Factories are everywhere. They emit harmful pollutants, **contaminating** water bodies and land. The poisonous substances eventually find their way into agricultural products.

Genetically modifying foods can increase yield, but their long-term effects on the human body are not yet fully known.

Rampant corruption

The mainland has laws on food safety, but there is a heavy “human element” in their implementation. **Collusion** between officials and businessmen is not uncommon. With official “protection”, violators can also escape punishment.

Legal problems

China promulgated a Food Hygiene Law (食品衛生法) in 1995. But that failed to ensure food safety. The more comprehensive Food Safety Law (食品安全法) was introduced in 2009.

The deterrent effects of the present laws are still not enough. Some unethical businessmen are willing to take their chances and continue to make and market sub-standard food.

How does Hong Kong conduct food inspections and gate-keeping?

Imported food

Hong Kong imports most of its food as we do not have a robust agricultural industry. The mainland is our most important food source. Certain high-risk imported foods, like milk, dairy products, frozen confections, game, meat and poultry are all subject to special controls.

For example, importing game requires the prior permission of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (食物環境衛生署). Importing meat and poultry is **confined** to sources recognised by the department.

Inspection and laws

Inspections are conducted at import, wholesale and retail levels. Testing reports are posted online as public information. The food laws prohibit and publish the import, export and the sale of bad food. All import and distribution businesses have to be registered. All food importers are required to keep records so the source of imported food can be easily traced.

What can the authorities do to ensure food safety?

Mainland

Increase deterrents: increase the penalties in the Food Safety Law, such as bigger fines and longer jail terms.

Strengthen the food inspection system: set up more food inspection centres and train more staff.

Public education: Advise the public to buy trustable brands. Teach people how to spot problem food products. Educate farmers on avoiding drugs or animal feed from **dubious** sources.

Media monitoring: Encourage the media to aggressively expose black-hearted food operations, and to educate the public.

Related departments: set up agencies that **specialise** in food inspection. Set up a food ingredients registration system. Conduct undercover investigations of black market food factories and prosecute offenders. Give more power to related agencies.

Hong Kong

Proactively notify mainland authorities of problem foods.

Assist the mainland in setting up food inspection systems and train related personnel.

Create a blacklist of problem food sources and ban them from importing in the future.



Did you know?

Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China

The 1995 Food Hygiene Law was replaced by the Food Safety Law in 2009. Further amendments were made in 2013 to further improve food safety.

Areas regulated include food production and processing, food circulation and catering as well as the production and use of food additives.

Hong Kong Food Surveillance Programme (食物監察計劃)

Run by the Centre for Food Safety (食物安全中心), the program is designed to control and prevent food hazards.

It is a three-tier approach – routine food surveillance, targeted food surveillance and seasonal food surveillance.

Inspectors take samples at import, wholesale and retail levels for microbiological, chemical and radiation testing. Microbiological testing covers both bacteria and viruses, while chemical testing includes natural toxins, food additives and contaminants.

Surveillance results are published for public information.

Codex Alimentarius Commission (國際食品法典委員會)

The body was set up in 1963 jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (聯合國糧食及農業組織) and the World Health Organization (世界衛生組織). It is tasked with collating and setting up an international system on food safety standards. Examples include common coding for food additives and standards on veterinary drug maximum residue levels.

